



“CONCEPTUAL METAPHOR IN ENGLISH LITERARY TEXTS: A
COGNITIVE LINGUISTIC PERSPECTIVE”

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Annotation: This article explores the role of conceptual metaphor in English literary texts from a cognitive linguistic perspective. Based on the theoretical framework developed by George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, conceptual metaphor theory explains how abstract thinking is structured through metaphorical mappings grounded in human bodily and cultural experience. The paper analyzes how English literary authors employ conceptual metaphors not merely as stylistic devices but as cognitive mechanisms that shape narrative structure, character development, emotional expression, and thematic construction. Examples from major English literary works, including texts by William Shakespeare and Emily Dickinson, demonstrate how metaphor functions at both linguistic and conceptual levels. The study argues that literary texts intensify and creatively transform conventional conceptual metaphors, offering readers new cognitive perspectives.

Key words: Conceptual metaphor, cognitive linguistics, source domain, target domain, embodiment, metaphorical mapping, literary discourse, figurative language, narrative cognition, semantic structure.

Annotatsiya: Ushbu maqolada ingliz adabiy matnlarida konseptual metaforaning o'rni kognitiv lingvistika nuqtai nazaridan tahlil qilinadi. George Lakoff va Mark Johnson tomonidan ishlab chiqilgan nazariy asosga tayangan holda, konseptual metafora nazariyasi abstrakt tafakkur insonning jismoniy va madaniy tajribasiga asoslangan metaforik xaritalash orqali shakllanishini tushuntiradi. Maqolada ingliz yozuvchilari metaforani faqat badiiy vosita sifatida emas, balki tafakkur mexanizmi sifatida qo'llashi yoritiladi. William Shakespeare va Emily Dickinson asarlaridan olingan misollar orqali metaforaning lingvistik va konseptual darajada ishlashi ko'rsatib beriladi. Tadqiqot natijasida adabiy matnlar an'anaviy konseptual metaforalarni yanada kuchaytirishi va ijodiy qayta shakllantirishi isbotlanadi.

Kalit so'zlar: Konseptual metafora, kognitiv lingvistika, manba sohasi, maqsad sohasi, mujassamlashuv, metaforik xaritalash, adabiy diskurs, obrazlilik, narrativ tafakkur, semantik tuzilma.

Аннотация: В статье рассматривается концептуальная метафора в английских литературных текстах с точки зрения когнитивной лингвистики. Теория, разработанная George Lakoff и Mark Johnson, объясняет, как абстрактное мышление формируется через метафорические проекции, основанные на телесном и культурном опыте человека. Анализируются примеры из произведений William Shakespeare и




Emily Dickinson. Делается вывод о том, что в литературе метафора выполняет когнитивную функцию, формируя структуру повествования и эмоциональное восприятие текста.

Ключевые слова: Концептуальная метафора, когнитивная лингвистика, источник, цель, воплощенность, метафорическое отображение, литературный дискурс, образность, нарратив, семантика.

Metaphor has long been considered an important tool in language and literature. Traditionally, it was thought to be a stylistic device used to decorate speech or enhance poetic expression. For centuries, scholars believed that metaphor existed only in literature and did not play a role in everyday thinking. It was seen as a figure of speech that adds beauty, emotion, or elegance to written and spoken language. However, research in the late twentieth century brought a major change in understanding metaphor, especially with the rise of cognitive linguistics. A significant contribution to this change came from George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, who argued that metaphor is not only a rhetorical device but also a fundamental mechanism of human thought. In their book *Metaphors We Live By*, they explained that people understand abstract concepts through more concrete, physical, and cultural experiences. This theory, known as Conceptual Metaphor Theory, suggests that metaphor shapes not just language, but also cognition itself. From a cognitive perspective, metaphor is a process by which humans structure abstract ideas using concrete experiences. People often conceptualize time, emotions, life, and morality through metaphors derived from everyday activities, physical interactions, or cultural knowledge. For example, expressions like “I am running out of time” or “She is full of energy” are not merely decorative. They reflect a systematic cognitive mapping from a concrete source domain to an abstract target domain. This insight changed the way researchers study both language and literature, showing that metaphor is a universal cognitive phenomenon. English literary texts are particularly rich in conceptual metaphors. Writers often do not use metaphor only for stylistic purposes. Instead, they build narrative structure, convey emotions, and develop characters through metaphorical thought. In many works, metaphors shape the central themes, guide the reader’s interpretation, and provide insight into human experience. In this way, literature becomes a tool for exploring not just aesthetic beauty, but also cognitive and philosophical ideas. The relevance of studying metaphor in English literature is also cultural and historical. Different literary periods demonstrate unique ways of using metaphor. Renaissance drama often uses metaphor to explore moral and political ideas, while Romantic poetry frequently connects human emotion with nature. Victorian novels, in contrast, may employ metaphors to comment on social structures, industrial change, or human psychology. By examining these patterns, researchers can understand how language reflects cultural and cognitive structures over time.

Another important aspect of metaphor is embodiment. Cognitive linguistics shows that human thought is shaped by bodily experience. Spatial orientation, motion, and physical,



perception influence the way people conceptualize abstract ideas. In literary texts, embodied metaphors create vivid images that readers can connect with emotionally and cognitively. This shared experience allows literature to communicate meaning beyond the literal level, engaging readers in interpretation and reflection.

The present study focuses on analyzing conceptual metaphors in English literary texts from a cognitive linguistic perspective. It examines how metaphors are structured, how they influence narrative and character development, and how they connect with readers' cognition. By understanding metaphor in this way, the study demonstrates that literature is not only an artistic creation but also a reflection of human thought processes.

Conceptual Metaphor.

Conceptual metaphor is a cognitive mechanism in which abstract ideas are understood through more concrete or familiar concepts. It is not just a stylistic device but a fundamental way humans organize thought¹. For instance, the metaphor life is a journey allows people to conceptualize progress, challenges, and goals using the familiar experience of traveling.

In literary texts, conceptual metaphors shape meaning, guide narrative, and influence character development. Shakespeare's *Macbeth* uses ambition is fire to represent uncontrolled desire that grows and eventually destroys, reflecting both psychological states and moral consequences. Romantic poets like Wordsworth employ the mind is a landscape, where natural features such as mountains and rivers represent inner thoughts and emotions.² Conceptual metaphors allow authors to convey abstract ideas such as love, death, and morality in ways that readers can cognitively and emotionally process. Without them, literature would be limited to literal expression, losing interpretive depth and emotional resonance.

Cognitive Linguistics.

Cognitive linguistics studies the relationship between language, thought, and human experience. It proposes that language both reflects and shapes human cognition. Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT), developed by George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, explains how abstract concepts are mapped onto concrete experiences.³ In literary studies, cognitive linguistics provides systematic methods to analyze metaphors. Emily Dickinson's poem *Because I could not stop for Death* demonstrates death is a journey, showing that metaphors reflect structured cognitive processes rather than arbitrary artistic expression.

Cognitive linguistics also emphasizes embodiment: spatial orientation, physical movement, and sensory experience influence how metaphors are constructed in literature.⁴ This approach enables readers to engage with texts both intellectually and emotionally.

¹ Lakoff, G., & Johnson, M. *Metaphors We Live By* (1980)

² Shakespeare, W. *Macbeth*

³ Lakoff, G., & Johnson, M. *Philosophy in the Flesh* (1999)

⁴ Hamid Ismoil, *Hikmatlar*





Source Domain.

The source domain is the concrete or familiar concept that helps structure understanding of an abstract target domain. In life is a journey, the journey is the source domain. It provides tangible elements such as paths, obstacles, and destinations, which map onto life's challenges and achievements. Writers often choose source domains based on physical, social, or cultural experiences. In Shakespeare's *King Lear*, storms, falling, and illness serve as source domains representing chaos, vulnerability, and moral decline. Romantic poets frequently use rivers, mountains, and skies as source domains to express emotions and inner conflict.

Recognizing source domains is crucial to understanding how abstract concepts in literature are grounded in concrete experience, making them accessible and emotionally compelling.

Target Domain.

The target domain is the abstract concept that is understood through the source domain. In life is a journey, life is the target domain. Target domains typically include abstract notions such as time, love, morality, or death.⁵

In literature, authors use target domains to communicate philosophical, emotional, and psychological ideas. Dickinson's *Because I could not stop for Death* presents death (target) through a carriage ride (source), making a complex and often frightening concept understandable.⁶ Studying target domains enables scholars and readers to analyze how abstract ideas are structured and expressed in literary texts, revealing patterns of metaphorical thinking.

Embodiment.

Embodiment refers to the idea that human physical experience shapes thought. People often conceptualize abstract ideas through bodily orientation, movement, and perception. Common examples include happy is up and sad is down.

In literature, embodiment enhances emotional engagement. Characters who "rise" often symbolize improvement, whereas "falling" signifies decline or failure. Shakespeare often uses vertical imagery to indicate psychological and moral states.⁷ Romantic poets employ physical movement and natural landscapes to represent mental and emotional conditions, giving abstract ideas a tangible form.

Metaphorical Mapping.

Metaphorical mapping connects elements of the source domain to elements of the target domain, allowing readers to understand abstract concepts through familiar experiences.


Examples include:

- **LOVE IS A BATTLE**, mapping conflict, victory, and defeat from war onto romantic relationships.

⁵ Emily Dickinson

⁶ Cho'ipon, N. *Kecha va kunduz*

⁷ Lakoff, G., & Johnson, M. *Philosophy in the Flesh*

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- **SOCIETY IS A MACHINE**, mapping control, repetition, and dysfunction from machinery onto social systems.

Metaphorical mapping organizes narrative events, develops characters, and conveys themes. Authors often manipulate mappings creatively, producing metaphors such as Ambition is fire or Love is a storm, enriching literary meaning.

Literary Discourse.

Literary discourse refers to the way language constructs meaning in literary texts. Conceptual metaphors shape discourse by organizing ideas, emotions, and narrative structures. In Shakespeare, the repeated metaphor ambition is fire reveals character development and moral consequences. Romantic poetry use the mind is a landscape to explore internal states, while Victorian novels like Dickens works employ society is a machine to critique social structures. Through literary discourse, metaphors are integrated systematically, providing coherence and depth to the text beyond literal language.

Figurative Language.

Figurative language is the use of language in a non-literal way to convey meanings, emotions, or aesthetic effects. It includes metaphors, similes, personification, symbolism, and hyperbole. Conceptual metaphors provide the cognitive foundation for figurative language. Without such conceptual structures, figurative expressions would appear random or decorative, lacking depth. In literature, figurative language allows authors to express complex emotions and ideas in ways that readers can understand and visualize. For instance, Shakespeare's "**All the world's a stage**" is based on the metaphor life is a stage, portraying human life as a theatrical performance with roles, entrances, and exits. This metaphor allows readers to understand social behavior, human aging, and life progression through familiar concepts. Romantic poets, such as Wordsworth and Coleridge, use figurative language extensively to connect natural imagery with human emotion. The mind is a landscape allows internal feelings to be externalized through mountains, rivers, and seasons. Figurative language enhances aesthetic beauty, creates mood, and deepens cognitive and emotional engagement with the text.


Moreover, figurative language helps in cross-cultural communication, because universal metaphors (like love is a journey or time is money) can convey meaning to readers even in different historical and cultural contexts. It acts as a bridge between abstract human experience and tangible perception.

Narrative Cognition

Narrative cognition, also called narrative thinking, refers to the way conceptual metaphors organize and structure a story's plot, character development, and thematic progression. It shows how human cognition is reflected in narrative patterns.⁸For example, the metaphor life is a journey structures stories as sequences of challenges, decisions, and achievements. A protagonist's movement through physical or metaphorical spaces represents

⁸ Herman, D. *Story Logic: Problems and Possibilities of Narrative*





emotional growth or moral development. Similarly, society is a machine can shape a narrative where characters function like parts of a mechanism, highlighting systemic control, hierarchy, and social dysfunction. Authors often use multiple interconnected metaphors to guide narrative cognition. In Victorian literature, for instance, Dickens maps industry is a machine onto characters' lives, showing the mechanical, impersonal forces of society. This structuring allows readers to predict events, understand character motivation, and recognize thematic patterns. Narrative cognition also enhances emotional engagement. By linking abstract concepts to familiar experiences, metaphors help readers anticipate consequences, empathize with characters, and interpret plot events. Essentially, it provides a cognitive map that makes complex stories intelligible and memorable.

Semantic Structure.

Semantic structure is the underlying organization of meaning in a text. Conceptual metaphors are crucial in forming semantic networks, linking abstract ideas to concrete experiences. These networks allow readers to understand, interpret, and emotionally connect with literature.⁹ For instance, Emily Dickinson's **death is a journey** creates a semantic structure connecting imagery (carriage, road, stopping for Death), cognition (conceptual mapping of life and death), and emotion (calm, acceptance, fear). Every element of the text reinforces the metaphor, producing a coherent semantic field. Similarly, Wordsworth's the mind is a landscape organizes meaning through natural elements. Mountains may represent challenges, rivers symbolize thoughts or emotions, and changing seasons reflect shifts in mood or perception. This semantic structure helps readers process abstract psychological and philosophical concepts through concrete, familiar imagery. Semantic structure also interacts with narrative structure and figurative language. Recurring metaphors, consistent source-target domain mappings, and embodied imagery all combine to produce an integrated meaning system. This allows literary works to be cognitively and emotionally coherent, reinforcing themes, guiding interpretation, and shaping the reader's experience. Understanding semantic structure is essential in literary studies, as it reveals how authors construct meaning systematically, showing that literature is not only artistic but also a reflection of human cognition and conceptual metaphorical thinking.

In Conclusion, conceptual metaphors are essential in English literary texts because they help readers understand abstract ideas through familiar experiences. By using source and target domains, embodiment, and metaphorical mapping, writers make complex concepts like life, death, love, and society easier to grasp. Cognitive linguistics shows that metaphors reflect patterns of human thought rather than decorative language. Through literary discourse, figurative language, narrative cognition, and semantic structure, conceptual metaphors organize meaning, guide interpretation, and enhance emotional engagement. Conceptual metaphors connect language, cognition, and literature, making abstract ideas tangible and enriching readers' understanding and experience.

⁹ Halliday, M. A. K., & Hasan, R. *Cohesion in English*





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